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ON SOME RECENT INTERPRETATIONS OF CATHARSIS

"The great virtue, but also the great vice, of 'catharsis' in modern interpretations has been its incurable vagueness. Every variety of moral, aesthetic, and therapeutic effect that is or could be experienced from tragedy has been subsumed under the venerable word at one time or another." So writes G. F. Else in 1957. Even the briefest survey of the history of commentary on *Poetics* 6.1449^{b}27 *(di' eleou kai phobou perainousa tēn tōn toioutōn pathēmatōn katharsin)* would furnish ample evidence for the accuracy of Else's observation; a full survey would include much of the history of western literary criticism. This paper has a more modest aim. It will be enough, I think, to notice that this history has oscillated between readings which claim that tragedy somehow brings about a "purification" of the audience's emotions of pity and fear, or other similar emotions, and readings which claim that tragedy "purges" such emotions. "Purgation" readings were favored by the early translators and commentators. Whether the cure was allopathic or homeopathic was a matter of some dispute, but that tragedy effected a "purge" or "cure" of undesirable or excessive emotion was the generally accepted position until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when "sentimental" theories stressing the value of the emotions, and particularly of pity (in Dryden's phrase, "that most God-like virtue"), found "purification" the more congenial term. Then, in the last half of the nineteenth century, the arguments of Weil (1848) and Bernays (1857, 1880) revived "purgation" with a heavy stress on the narrow, medical sense of the metaphor, and this view, with modifications, became the most widely accepted interpretation among classical scholars; it perhaps remains so even today despite the efforts of the revisionists to be discussed in this paper.[1] One result of this near consensus of scholarly opinion has been that many modern critics of tragedy, humbly accepting the philologists' claim to exegetical expertise in the matter of Aristotle's meaning, have concluded that this meaning was therefore simply too lim-

[1] One who wishes to explore the long and labyrinthine history of translation, interpretation, and elaboration devoted to Aristotle's phrase should start with B. Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism: The Late Renaissance in Italy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1962). Hathaway gives a full ninety-five pages to a detailed account of the earliest commentaries on catharsis. B. Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (2 vols., Chicago, 1961) is massive and authoritative, but it is not arranged, as Hathaway's book is, to bear so directly on our particular issue. It is, however, the fullest account of the period's treatment of the entire *Poetics*. A brief but useful discussion of the main interpretations is V. Kostić, "Aristotle's Catharsis in Renaissance Poetics," *Ziva Antika* 10 (1960) 61-74. P. R. Sellin, *Heinsius: On Plot in Tragedy* (Northridge, Ca., 1971) may be consulted at this point because, while Heinsius adds little to the Italian commentators, he seems to have been instrumental in transmitting their views to the rest of Europe. A compact account of the interesting transformation of "Neo-Stoic purgation" into "sentimental purification" can be found in B. Hathaway, "John Dryden and the Function of Tragedy," *PMLA* 57 (1943) 665-673. Hathaway's essay throws the main lines of development into sharp relief but at the cost of considerable simplification. A better survey of the complex development of eighteenth-century thinking on tragic effect is E. Wasserman, "The Pleasures of Tragedy,"

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ited; and they have gone on to develop their own theories of tragic effect, sometimes expropriating Aristotle's term for their own purposes.[2] It is interesting, then, to view certain of the most recent scholarly commentators against this background, for their formal or "aesthetic" interpretations of "catharsis" are in most respects consonant with several main lines of modern criticism, and they would, if accepted, make Aristotle's "catharsis" once again a respectable critical term.

A brief sketch of these main lines will be sufficient for the purposes of this paper. One measure of the potency of Aristotle's term, or the potency of the vast critical tradition which surrounds it, is the fact that one can hardly write about serious drama without advancing some view of the "catharsis" or the emotional effect to be produced. So it will be understood that my selection is necessarily somewhat arbitrary. I intend simply to call to mind some of the current thinking about tragic effect as a useful context within which to examine some recent interpretations of Aristotle's phrase. I rather casually apply critical labels to the same end.

We should expect that the foremost "affective" critic of our century, I. A. Richards, would have something to say on this matter, and he does not disappoint us. Indeed, for Richards, great tragedy is the ultimate literary form. Richards' basic approach to literature is to take Coleridge's phrase about poetry achieving a reconciliation of discordant qualities and to apply this directly to the reader in accordance with his affec-

ELH, 14 (1947), 283-307, which can be supplemented by A. O. Aldrige, "The Pleasures of Pity," *ELH,* 16 (1949), 76-87. A recent assessment of Lessing's reading of Aristotle and the extensive influence of his interpretation is A. K. Dickson, "Lessing's Creative Misinterpretation of Aristotle," *Greece and Rome,* 14 (1967), 53-60.

For a review of nineteenth-century scholarship see the famous editions of Butcher (London, 1911) and Bywater (Oxford, 1909), both of which reflect the triumph of Bernays' interpretation, though Butcher himself extends purgation to purification and thus anticipates the most recent developments: "Tragedy, then, does more than effect the homeopathic cure of certain passions. Its function on this view is not merely to provide an outlet for pity and fear, but to provide for them a distinctively aesthetic satisfaction, to purify and clarify them by passing them through the medium of art" (pp. 254-55). The Susemihl-Hicks edition of the *Politics* gives a long summary of interpretations of catharsis (pp. 641-656), and Bywater (pp. 361-365) cites some fifty-eight different translations of our phrase between 1527 and 1899, to which D.K.L. Choudbury adds two earlier examples in "Catharsis in Medieval Latin *Poetics*," *Classical World,* 62 (1968), 99-100. Speaking very generally, we can say that Bywater's list reflects the trends remarked above. Forms of "purgation" (purgans, espurgatione, purgationem, purga, purghino, purgare, etc.) dominate translations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while versions of "purification" (refines, purifying, lustrationem, Reinigung, etc.) appear more frequently in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Of course, as Bywater himself remarks, a mere listing of translations can be sometimes deceiving. For example, Milton translates "perficiens talium affectuum lustrationem" in his Latin version, but in the Preface to *Samson Agonistes* he writes "to purge the mind of those and such like passions," and his explanation makes it clear that he takes the metaphor in a medical sense. Butcher, on the other hand, translates "purgation," but develops a "purification" reading in the commentary quoted above. Nevertheless, the evidence of Bywater's list is consistent with the generalizations ventured in the text.

[2] For lists of twentieth-century scholarly works see L. Cooper and A. Gudeman, *A Bibliography of the Poetics of Aristotle* (New Haven, 1928) with a supplement by M. T. Herrick, *AJP,* 42 (1931), 168-174, and G. F. Else, "Survey of Work on Aristotle's *Poetics,*

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tive theory of value. Human beings are essentially bundles of often conflicting "appetencies." We go to art because in the experience of art the greatest number of these "appetencies" are appealed to and, what is more, harmonized. "What clearer instance of the 'balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities' can be found than Tragedy. Pity, the impulse to approach, and Terror, the impulse to retreat, are brought in Tragedy to a reconciliation which they find nowhere else, and with them who knows what other allied groups of equally discordant impulses. Their union in an ordered single response is the *catharsis* by which Tragedy is recognized, whether Aristotle meant anything of this kind or not."[3]

It is a logical step from Richards' type of "affectivism" to other forms of psychological criticism, but these approaches, whatever their ultimate validity, tend to lead back to the older readings of "purgation" or "purification" and so lead away from our present subject.[4] More to the point, more consistent with Richards, and certainly the most popular type of literary criticism in our century, is that which is usually labeled "formalism." (It is also called "contextualism," "explicative holism," "aestheticism," and several other things, especially by critics of a different persuasion.) The "formal" approach to tragic effect is not new—it was advanced, for instance, by Hume—and it is seldom completely absent from any interpretation of tragedy. But it is rarely stated so directly and emphatically as by Murray Krieger, who deserves to be quoted at some length:

> . . .so long as tragedy remained a defined literary form, the fearsome chaotic necessities of the tragic vision would have to surrender finally to the higher unity which contained them. It is perhaps in this sense that we can speak of the formally sustained literary work ultimately coming to terms with itself. And from the standpoint of the audience—or at least the trained and sophisticated audience—even if there were no thematic elements of release for the passions aroused by the tragic performers, the disciplining and restricting demands upon aesthetic contemplation made by the rounded aesthetic whole would effect the catharsis demanded by Aristotle. The purg-

1940-1954," *Classical World* 48 (1955) 73-82 which contains a section on works treating "catharsis." See also the long note in the same author's *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Harvard, 1957), pp. 225-226. The general acceptance of Bernays' view (Else, in 1957, calls it still the "vulgate" reading) and the consequent feeling that Aristotle's concept is therefore too narrow and must be abandoned could be illustrated from several sources. To cite only one, see D. M. Hill, " 'Catharsis': An Excision from the Dictionary of Critical Terms," *Essays in Criticism* 8 (1958) 113-119.

[3] *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1925), pp. 245-246.

[4] Examples abound. An interesting extension of Freud's views to a Mithridatic theory of tragic effect can be found in Lionel Trilling's "Freud and Literature" in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1950) pp. 32-54. The vast field of anthropological or archetypal criticism is represented, in so far as one essay can represent it, in Maud Bodkin's "Archetypal Patterns in Tragic Poetry" (in R. Corrigan, ed., *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, San Francisco, 1965) which glances at Neitzche, Freud, Jung, and Murray. Other versions of "myth" criticism applied to tragedy can be sampled in Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a*

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> ing of dangerously aroused emotions, following as it does upon the satisfaction, the soothing grace, bestowed upon wayward materials by aesthetic completeness, carrying "aesthetic distance" with it as it brings us the assurances of form, presents us its formal order as a token, a security—something given in hand—to guarantee the cosmic order beyond the turbulance it has conquered. Thus it is that the cathartic principle *is* ultimately a purely formalistic one, even as tragedy, despite its foreboding rumblings, can remain a force for affirmation through its formal powers alone. Thus it is too that in the *Poetics* Aristotle rightly limits himself to formal considerations, leaving to later and less solvent generations the thematic implications of the vision which, so long as it is aesthetically framed in tragedy, is denied in its very assertion.[5]

Here we have not only a cogent statement of the formalist reading of tragic effect but also an unargued imputation of that view to Aristotle. As we shall see, there are scholars who will argue it. More commonly, the formalist interpretation is advanced without Aristotle's authority. Thus, Fredrick Pottle specifically remarks that he is not completing Aristotle but stating his own position:

> The greatest evil of man is, I repeat, the haunting fear that he will be forced to admit that the universe is meaningless. The pity and terror with which tragedy deals are both reflections of this fear. Tragedy must use the material of pity and terror unsparingly, for only so can it embody our central problem; but by imposing form on pity and terror, by giving them direction, it makes us feel, at least temporarily, that there is purpose in our own afflictions and distractions. By regarding patterned pity and terror we are purged for the time being of our everyday or random pity and terror.[6]

These critics share, then, the belief that tragedy imposes artistic form on the most pitiable and frightening events and thus satisfies our "rage for order." A similar view, with a more "intellectualist" cast, is that of J. W. Krutch. Tragedy, he claims, ". . .makes endurable the realization that events of the outward world do not correspond with the desires of the heart, and thus, in its own particular way, it does what all religions do, for it gives a rationality, a meaning, and a justification to the universe."[7]

Theatre (Princeton, 1949) and Herbert Weisinger, *Tragedy and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall* (East Lansing, 1953) to cite only two examples. Difficult to classify except under loose lables like "psychological" or "affective" criticism are Kenneth Burke's two essays, "On Catharsis, or Resolution," *Kenyon Review,* 21 (1959), 337-75 and "Catharsis: Second View," *Centennial Review,* 6 (1961), 107-132. The list could easily be expanded. So, though my essay concentrates on "formal" or "aesthetic" perspectives, "affective" approaches to tragedy are not uncommon in modern criticism and these approaches, when they consider the term "catharsis" at all, generally interpret it as a process operating on the emotions of the audience.

[5] *The Tragic Vision* (New York, 1960), pp. 4-5.

[6] "Catharsis," *Yale Review,* 40 (1950-51), p. 631.

[7] "The Tragic Fallacy," in Corrigan, *op. cit.,* p. 276.

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We can conclude this sketchy survey with a glance at John Gassner who is even more determinedly "intellectualist" with his insistence on "enlightenment." For Gassner, without enlightenment there is no tragedy, only melodrama: ". . .enlightenment is not only the third element in catharsis, but the decisive one. The ultimate relief comes when the dramatist brings the tragic struggle to a state of rest. . . Only enlightenment, a clear comprehension of what was involved in the struggle, an understanding of cause and effect, a judgment on what we have witnessed, and an induced state of mind that places it above the riot of passion—can effect this necessary equilibrium."[8] According to Gassner, "had Aristotle pursued his investigation of classic drama further, he would have surely arrived at this view himself" (p. 516). Here too we will find some who are willing to argue that Aristotle had already arrived at this view. For the most part, however, Richards' phrase "whether Aristotle meant anything of this kind of not" could be appended to most modern interpretations of tragic effect.

Meanwhile, classical scholars have continued to busy themselves with the question of what in fact Aristotle did mean. A useful starting point for a survey of some recent investigations is G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Harvard, 1957). Although I can find few writers who totally agree with his conclusions,[9] Else's massive commentary neatly sums up previous scholarship and his analysis, which gives the inquiry a new direction, has provoked other attempts to re-interpret Aristotle's troublesome phrase, *di' eleou kai phobou perainousa tēn tōn toioutōn pathēmatōn katharsin.* At this point a gloss, albeit a clumsy one, will make it easier to follow the arguments: through *(dia)* pity and fear or pitiable and fearful incidents *(eleou kai phobou)* bringing about (*perainousa*—a participle agreeing with mimesis) the *katharsis* of these or such *(toioutōn)* emotions or sufferings or events portraying emotions or sufferings *(pathēmatōn).* Else, looking over the mountain of commentary on this phrase, gives a list of several "presuppositions" common to nearly all interpretations, from which I further select the following: (1) Most commentators agree that Aristotle is thinking of a change to be brought about in the spectator. (2) Most assume that *pathēmatōn* means feelings or passions. (3) Most take *eleou kai phobou* to refer to the spectator's emotions. (4) As for catharsis, "a majority of interpreters in the last century follow Bernays and Weil in understanding it to be a 'purgation'; though the older idea of 'purification' still has some supporters."[10]

[9] One who does agree is L. M. Welch, "Catharsis, Structural Purification, and Else's Aristotle," *Bucknell Review,* 19 (1971), 31-50. This essay elaborates Else's view and applies it to several plays.

[10] pp. 226-27. Actually "purgation" is the older idea in the long view. See note 1 above.

[8] "Catharsis in the Modern Theatre," in B. Clark, ed., *European Theories of the Drama* (New York, 1965), p. 516. Compare on this point Kenneth Burke's stress on "perception" as the completing element, a stress echoed by Fergusson in his introduction to *Aristotle's Poetics* (New York, 1961), 13.

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Else proceeds to attack each of these assumptions. His arguments are too long to be summarized here, but his crucial and most radical assertion is that Aristotle is not talking about a change in the spectator at all. Rather, the catharsis is seen to apply to the painful or fatal acts *(pathēmatōn)*, which results in this translation: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action. . .carrying to completion, through a course of events involving pity and fear, the purification of those painful or fatal acts which have that quality" (p. 221). In his commentary to *Poetics* 14, Else further explains his meaning. The catharsis is not a change in the spectator, it is "the purification of the tragic act by the demonstration that its motive was not *miaron*" (shameful, polluted) and it is accomplished "by the whole structure of the drama, but above all by the recognition" (p. 439). In the *Oedipus,* for instance, it is "Oedipus' self-blinding, his transport of grief and remorse when he learns the truth, that finally assures us of his 'purity' and releases our tears. Thus recognition is the structural device which makes it possible for the hero to prove that he did indeed act *di' hamartian tina* (through some error) and so deserves our pity."[11]

It is difficult to assess Else's interpretation. His arguments are full, his scholarship is impressive, and he strives throughout to see the *Poetics* as a coherent and self-contained document. Thus, while he admits his reading ignores the famous remarks about catharsis in the *Politics*, his operating assumption is that the *Poetics* should be interpreted largely on the basis of internal evidence. But even those scholars who accept this assumption have been unable to accept his conclusions, perhaps because his reading produces too many dislocations. To take the most obvious example, in this instance Else puts the catharsis not in the audience but in the play, while he puts the recognition not in the play but in the audience.[12]

Still, Else's bold interpretation has inspired others to re-think the problem, sometimes at least partly along the same lines. H.D.F. Kitto's essay is an example.[13] I take these to be the main points of his argument: (1) The passage on music and *katharsis* in the *Politics* is not relevant. (2) Nowhere else in the *Poetics* does Aristotle seem much concerned with "effect" on the audience, and certainly not with moral effect. (3) *di' eleou kai phobou* means just what it appears to mean—through pity and fear. (4) *"pathēmatōn"* does not need to refer to emotions—it could mean, and probably does here mean, "distressful events." (5) *katharsis* is not a technical term. It appears in many contexts, including the most humble. Kitto suggests "cleansing" or "cleaning up" as the simplest translation. (6) *katharsis* is not presented as the end or goal of tragedy; it is not the particular tragic pleasure; it is not the defining feature of the

[11] p. 438. Here and elsewhere in this paper I have transliterated the Greek quotations and supplied a translation in parentheses.

[12] See W. K. Wimsatt, "Aristotle and Oedipus or Else," in *Hateful Contraries* (Kentucky, 1965), 72-89, for some objections to this and other "dislocations."

[13] "Catharsis," in L. Wallach, ed., *The Classical Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966), pp. 133-147.

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genre; and it does not refer to the audience at all. "This, then, is where our argument has led us: it is not the emotions of the audience that are purified, purged, or otherwise disposed of; it is the pitiful or frightening *incidents* to which this happens; and what brings it about is the mimesis, the act of representation." Like Else, Kitto sees the *Poetics* as a coherent, self-contained structure and he stresses the "formal" emphasis of the treatise. Indeed, his interpretation brings Aristotle's definition in line with many types of formal criticism by remarking the concentration of effect produced by the formal shaping of the play: ". . .the mimesis removes the crudities of impact that the events would have in real life. It trims away jagged edges. It does not by any means take away from the emotional impact of the event; in one way, indeed, it heightens this, by concentrating the impact, for it gives a certain clear direction to our emotions. It can surround the event with a certain grave, even appalling stillness, whereas the corresponding event in real life would be, so to speak, noisy and confused" (p. 143). And again, "such a 'purification' of the distressful event is, I suggest, what Aristotle meant by his catharsis *here*, and it seems to make sense. The mimesis, the purifying effect of the tragic art, removes the conditions that would cause bewilderment and pain, and leaves something that is orderly and significant, and therefore a source of pleasure" (pp. 146-47).

Kitto's argument has much to recommend it. His handling of the grammatical and lexical problems of the phrase is clear; his reading affirms the coherence of the *Poetics*; and his formalistic interpretation of catharsis is consistent with Aristotle's basic approach to literature. It is also consisent with much modern formal criticism, though this, of course, is not in itself an argument for the accuracy of the reading. All in all, I find Kitto's attempt to cure the "incurable vagueness" very impressive. Indeed, his operation is so incisive, his stitching so deft, we scarcely notice that the patient has died on the table. It is not simply that catharsis is now, on Kitto's reading, no longer a term of special force nor a term of special relevance to tragedy; this is exactly what he was trying to show. But has it not become a somewhat superfluous term as well? If catharsis means merely the artistic ordering of material, an ordering to be found in every form of literature, then it would seem to be so clearly implicit in "mimesis" as to make the terms essentially interchangeable. In other words, Aristotle could as well have written *katharsis praxeōs . . . perainousa tēn mimēsin* in place of *mimēsis praxeōs . . . perainousa tēn katharsin*. For whether we say the artistic representation achieves the cleaning up of the incidents or we say the cleaning up of the incidents achieves the artistic representation would appear to make little difference, except that the latter is slightly more logical. I am not sure this is a fatal objection to Kitto's reading, but it is a point which troubles me, especially in an essay which assumes that Aristotle was picking his words with care.

An argument very similar to Kitto's but independent of it was ad-

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vanced in the same year by Harvey D. Goldstein. [14] Like Kitto, Goldstein finds the key to the phrase in the concept of mimesis, and he devotes the first part of his essay to an examination of that term. Following Richard McKeon, he argues that mimesis is essentially the artistic ordering of material—material being everything that is *not* the artistic organization. Unlike Kitto, he reads *eleou* and *phobou* as "of the pitiable and terrible" but he agrees with him on the main point that the catharsis is performed not on the audience but on the material. Thus, "it would seem that the catharsis of the pitiable and terrible is some sort of ordering of pitiable and terrible material to serve the end or form the poem" (p. 574). On Goldstein's reading, then, catharsis is an aesthetic process operating on the poem, and the pleasure it produces is an aesthetic pleasure. After considering the merits of "purging" and "purifying" as alternative translations, he decides "pruning" is the best word. "The rendering of catharsis as pruning happily solves the problem. Pruning is both a taking away and a shaping, a way of making material usable . . . We now read the definition 'tragedy is a poetic ordering of a serious action . . . an ordering which, working with pathetic and fearful material, effects the pruning of such material and thus renders that material proper aesthetic material for tragedy' " (p. 575).

Here, then, we have another formalistic interpretation. Goldstein's exposition of mimesis is fuller than Kitto's, but not essentially different. His reading of *eleou kai phobou*, however, as "of pitiable and terrible material" would be subject to Kitto's objection to that construction. And of course the problem of the possible superfluity of the key term appears here as well. But Goldstein is aware of the difficulty and tries to deal with it:

> It might be objected that if catharsis is merely some sort of aesthetic ordering of the proper materials, this process is already included in the mimesis doctrine. The reply might be that Aristotle wanted to demonstrate how tragedy, which by its very nature must imitate the pathetic and terrible, could still be beautiful and pleasurable, the catharsis doctrine highlighting this point for him by demonstrating that the pathetic and fearful involved are aesthetic pathos and terror, pathos and terror appropriate to tragedy, and are therefore not to be confused with a response to pity and terror as they exist in life (p. 575).

I am not entirely convinced by this, but it is at least an attempt to meet the objection.

To this point we have heard "purification," "pruning," and "cleans-

[14] "Mimesis and Catharsis Reëxamined," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 25 (1966), 567-77. Goldstein remarks that he has found no commentator besides Else (1957) who had explored this "aesthetic" interpretation of catharsis. But at least a few suggestions along these or similar lines had been advanced in G. K. Gresseth, "The System of Aristotle's Poetics, *TAPA*, 89 (1958), 312-335, and S. Alibertis, "La Définition de la Tragédie chez Aristote de la Catharsis," *Archives de Philosophie,* 21 (1958), 60-75.

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ing'' offered as translations of catharsis. Let us now attend for a moment to L. A. Post's suggestion of ''clarification.''

> Assuming, then, that the figure in Aristotle's mind is one derived from winnowing or churning, that is, clarification by agitation, we may interpret his phrase somewhat as follows: 'Tragedy produces its clarifying effect by bringing to bear on the mind imaginary scenes of grief and terror, thus freeing it from preoccupation with similar emotions of its own.' The catharsis of tragedy, then, results in a clarification both of emotion and of thought, for emotion becomes objective in a work of art, and the mind is elevated so that it contemplates its own emotion and thus achieves imaginative freedom.[15]

Post's view is traditional in the sense that the catharsis is operating on the audience. But the use of the term ''clarification'' and the idea that the effect operates on the intellect as well as on the emotions seem to open promising lines. These lines have been most fully explored by the most vocal exponent of catharsis as clarification, Leon Golden.

Golden first presented his thesis in a 1962 essay. It was repeated and expanded in O. B. Hardison's commentary to Golden's 1968 translation of the *Poetics* and further amplified and defended by Golden in 1969, twice more in 1973, and twice again in 1976.[16] I have drawn upon all these sources. As it happens, Golden has himself provided a useful summary of some of his main points, one of which is that the catharsis phrase does not come ''like a bolt from the blue'' but is in fact adequately prepared for and fully integrated into the fabric of the *Poetics*.

> . . .from Chapter 1 of the *Poetics* ($1447^{a}13$-16) we know that poetry is a form of *mimesis*; from Chapter 4 ($1488^{b}4$-19) we observe. . .that the essential pleasure and goal of *mimesis* is a learning experience; in Chapter 9 ($1451^{b}5$-10) this point is confirmed and clarified when we are told that poetry is more philosophical and significant than history because it aims at the expression of universals rather than particulars. . .in Chapter 14 ($1453^{b}10$-14) we are told that the specific pleasure of tragedy is derived 'from pity and fear through *mimesis*' and so we conclude that the goal of tragedy must be an intellectually pleasant learning experience concerned with the phenomenon of pity and fear in human existence; since *katharsis* and its related forms

[15] *From Homer to Menander* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951), p. 267.

[16] ''Catharsis,'' *TAPA,* 93 (1962), 51-60; *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968); ''Mimesis and Katharsis,'' *Classical Philology,* 64 (1969), 145-153; ''Katharsis as Clarification: An Objection Answered,'' *Classical Quarterly,* 23 (1973), 45-46; ''The Purgation Theory of Catharsis,'' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 31 (1973), 473-79. The last is a direct attempt to refute Bernays' view, further evidence of the tenacity of that view first expressed in 1857. See also Golden's ''Toward a Definition of Tragedy,'' *Classical Journal,* 72 (1976), 21-33 and ''Epic, Tragedy, and Catharsis,'' *Classical Philology,* 71 (1976), 77-85. The latter, which answers James Hogan's objections to the ''clarification'' reading (*Classical Philology,* 68 [1973], 95-108), cites Kurt von Fritz, *Antike and moderne Tragödie* (Berlin, 1962) as stressing the ''Erkenntnis function'' of catharsis and thereby affirming ''the existence of a significant intellectual dimension of this key term.''

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> are used by Plato, Epicurus, Philodemus, and other writers in the sense of intellectual clarification, there is full justification for rendering this term in Chapter 6 (1449^{b}28) with the intellectual signification that makes it an integral part of the general argument of the *Poetics*.[17].

Unlike most commentators, then, Golden feels that the phrase is anticipated in Aristotle's earlier remarks about imitation as a source of pleasure and specifically a pleasure associated with learning. Further, the observation in Chapter 4 concerning pleasure derived from the imitation of objects in themselves repellent anticipates the paradox of tragic pleasure. Again, in Chapter 14 we are told that the poet should provide pleasure from pity and fear through imitation. By this route Golden comes to agree with Else that the catharsis must apply to the incidents, not directly to the spectator's emotions. He then reads the phrase in question: "achieving, through the representation of pitiful and fearful situations, the clarification of such incidents."

It occurs to me that there are several advantages to the term clarification in this context, not the least of which is one that Golden himself might hesitate to acknowledge. I refer to the ambiguity of the word or, if you like, its shiftiness. It won't stay put. So in one sense Golden admittedly follows Else by placing the catharsis in the text, and in a similar sense he agrees with Kitto and Goldstein that it is a process applied to the incidents by the very act of mimesis. In quite another sense, however, the catharsis would appear to be operating on the audience, our understanding is clarified. And sometimes it seems to be even an operation performed by the audience. In Golden's earliest essay on the subject we read that catharsis becomes "nothing more, but nothing less, than a synonym for the process of inference which Aristotle described in Chapter 4 as *manthanein kai syllogizesthai ti hekaston, hoion hoti houtos ekeinos* (which Golden elsewhere translates: 'to learn and infer what each thing is—for example, that this particular object is that kind of object'). The inference. . .is the act of clarification or the 'catharsis' " (*TAPA*, 58).

There seems to be no escaping the fact that here the catharsis—the in-

[17] *Classical Quarterly,* 45. The phrase "like a bolt from the blue" is Kitto's (*op. cit.* 136) but he is echoing several commentators who find no preparation for the appearance of the catharsis phrase in Aristotle's famous definition, even though Aristotle says the definition results from what has been said. It is interesting to observe that Kitto and Else, who are concerned to play down the importance traditionally given to the term "catharsis," find this lack of preparation a sign that Aristotle thought the word less significant than later commentators have made it. For the opposite reasons, Golden is concerned to argue that the word has been fully anticipated. More recently, M. Pabst Battin, "Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy in the *Poetics*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 33 (1974-75), 155-170, 293-302 has argued in detail that the catharsis phrase is not derived by means of Aristotle's concept of definition but "is simply added, without any prior justification." Thus, Battin seems to side with Else and Kitto. But, in fact, Battin sees the addition of the phrase as proof of its great significance. The fact that Aristotle "was willing, so to speak, to spoil an otherwise perfectly straightforward and rigorous definition to include the notion of catharsis suggests that he accorded it more than ordinary importance and surely considered it a central feature of tragedy."

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ference—must be performed by the audience. As far as I can see, Golden, in his various presentations of his view, does not seem to be aware of this fruitful ambiguity; at any rate he never specifically remarks upon it. Nevertheless, it is there, and I think it is a positive advantage which inheres in the very term "clarification." The mimesis clarifies the incidents in such a way that the audience is able to infer the universal from the particular and so receive the pleasure which comes from learning. Through artistic representation, our emotions are "intellectualized" and mastered. In the *Oedipus,* for example, where Golden finds the main theme to be "the fundamental limitation of the human intellect in dealing with the unfathomable mystery that surrounds divine purpose," the audience watching the particular events of the play comes to see them "as an individual manifestation of this universal condition. . .Through this process of perceiving that the source of the particular pitiful and fearful events of the play is a universal condition of existence, our understanding of the nature of pity and fear, as they relate to the human condition, has been 'clarified' " (*TAPA,* 58). To editorialize, the mimetic process clarifies the materials to create the poetic structure; the poetic structure, in turn, clarifies our understanding.

To my mind, Golden's approach has many virtues. Like Kitto and Else he is concerned to assert the unity of the *Poetics,* but his reading of the key phrase is even more fully integrated with the rest of the treatise. Further, the implications and overtones of the word "clarification" are consistent not only with Aristotle's formal emphasis but also with Aristotle's generally "intellectualist" approach. The pleasure derived from mimesis is the pleasure of perceiving (the root, after all, of "aesthetics"), of learning, and the translation of catharsis as "clarification" fits much better than the other alternatives with the widely held opinion that Aristotle's famous definition does seem to say that catharsis is the end or goal of tragic art. It is also consonant, we might note, with most types of formal criticism and equally consonant with those modern theories cited above which stress the perception or enlightenment which should result from our experience of tragedy. In contrast to alternatives like "pruning" or "cleansing," "clarification" is not so easily interchangeable with "mimesis"; it tends to reach out toward the audience. In contrast to "purgation" or "purification" it is free from the vexing medical or religious overtones which inevitably accompany those terms. Finally, while it might seem a paradoxical treatment to substitute the ambiguous "clarification" for the "incurably vague" catharsis, I think the shifty locus of the term is precisely what is needed here. That is, whether we place the clarification in the act of mimesis or in the act of inference which the mimesis allows—and Golden has it both ways at different times—the term works equally well in either context.[18]

[18] Compare on this point E. Schaper, "Aristotle's Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure, *Philosophical Quarterly,* 18 (1968), 131-143. Schaper, apparently working independently of Golden, Goldstein, and Kitto, also argues that catharsis is an element in all forms of art and an element which involves the understanding of the audience. In tragedy we still have a strong emotional response but, because mimetic works organize their materials so as to

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These, then, are some of the recent attempts to interpret Aristotle's phrase.[19] Most of them share the assumption that the *Poetics* is a coherent and largely self-contained document which can be interpreted on the basis of internal evidence, and most agree that the formal, shaping power of art (mimesis) is the concept to be stressed, for what is ultimately affected is the audience's understanding; the pleasure is basically perceptual or "aesthetic." Even Else, with his emphasis on audience recognition, might be included here. They differ in their translations of catharsis, but they agree that it is a process connected with mimesis and that it is a process operating within the work, though in the case of "clarification," and very importantly, not only within the work. On all these points there is a clear contrast with the long critical tradition which has gone to the *Politics*[20] or the *Ethics* to develop physiological, psychological, or religious interpretations of audience reaction. It is apparent, then, that the flood of scholarly commentary is ploughing a new channel. The extent to which this may become the main stream is more difficult to estimate. Certainly the older interpretations have many advocates. G.M.A. Grube, for example, has no doubt that Aristotle is talking about a "purge" of the emotions,[21] and D. W. Lucas, in his recent scholarly commentary on the *Poetics* (Oxford, 1968), devotes a seventeen- page appendix to "catharsis" in which he finds no occasion to mention any of the interpretations I have surveyed here. For Lucas, Bernays' view remains, with qualifications, the essentially correct one. Nor is the tradi-

bring out the essential meaning of the events, our response is transmuted to "aesthetic" enjoyment. A similar resolution between emotional reaction and understanding is offered by Pedro Laín Entralogo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven, 1970) who finds the key in the extension of "recognition" to the audience. "The anagnorisis represents, in short, the triumph of that deep demand for expression and clarification of the human destiny—a figurative, verbal expression and clarification—that in the face of every possible purely musical and Dionysiac interpretation beats deep within the breast of Attic tragedy. The *Poetics* calls this 'resolution' of the affective state of the spectator *katharsis*" (p. 80).

19 There are others, but most of these turn out to be either "traditional," at least in the sense that they see the catharsis as operating on the audience's emotions (e.g. N. Spiegel, "Aristotle's Theory of the Perception of Tragedy," *Eos*, 40 (1965), 44-56, or H. Echternach, "Die Interpretation des Tragischen durch Aristotles," *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung,* 27(1973), 348-66) or else decidedly odd. An example of the latter I take to be A. Nicev, *L 'Enigma de la Catharsis Tragique dans Aristote* (Sofia: Editions de l'Academie Bulgare des Sciences, (1970) where an entire book is devoted to the dubious argument that we feel fear and pity for the tragic hero on the mistaken assumption that his suffering is unmerited, but as the play progresses and we discover that the suffering is in fact deserved, our pity and fear are removed (the catharsis!). Difficult to classify under either heading is T. Brunius', *Inspiration and Katharsis* (Uppsala, 1966).

20 An interesting exception here is P. Somville, "Katharsis et Esthétique chez Aristote," *L'Antiquité Classique,* 40 (1971), 607-622. Somville also finds the key in *mimesis,* the formal or fictive element which operates directly on our perceptions so that we respond differently to the artistic representations than we would to actual events. It is the *mimesis* "qui peut seul permettre ce filtrage purificateur des emotions qu' Aristote appèle *katharsis*" (p. 619). But Somville then applies the same reasoning to musical *mimesis* to reconcile the passage in the *Politics* to this interpretation. Our response in each case is perceptual or "aesthetic."

21 *The Greek and Roman Critics* (Toronto, 1965), 75.

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tional notion of "ethical purification" absent from modern interpretations. One form of it has been ably advanced by Humphry House, and a reviewer of the Golden-Hardison text finds their reading "much less Aristotlean, much less effective as an answer to Plato, and much less adequate to the facts of aesthetic experience than House's."[22]

So the controversy continues. The older interpretations of "purgation" and "purification" retain strong supporters, and there are more than a few scholars who are convinced that Aristotle's meaning is simply beyond recovery. In a field so strewn with abandoned monuments to specialized learning, their cautionary counsel deserves to be heard. Even so, I believe the lines of interpretation explored above have much to recommend them. They are solidly based on the *Poetics* itself; they are consistent with Aristotle's general direction of thought, and they have, therefore, a serious claim to represent Aristotle's "real" meaning. That these interpretations, and particularly the reading of catharsis as clarification, also make Aristotle's phrase quite consistent with much modern criticism is a feature worth remarking, though this cannot in itself be an argument for their acceptance. Similarly, the fact that Aristotle's view appears on this reading to be more like ours rather than less and the *Poetics* consequently emerges as a more coherent and intelligible document are, I think, results not wholly unfortunate and also worth remarking.

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22 The reviewer is M. Hubbard, *Classical Review* 20 (1970) 176-181. See also Hubbard's remarks in D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, eds., *Ancient Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1972) pp. 88-89, 132-134. For Golden's response, see *Classical Quarterly* 23 (1973) 45-56, and *Classical Philology* 71 (1976) 77-85. House's interpretation appears in *Aristotle's Poetics* (rev. ed., London, 1961) pp. 100-111.

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